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Katherine Buckley
University of Puget Sound

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'Out of Place:' Gangs, Delinquency, and Identity Formation in Los Angeles and Central America

Katherine Buckley
CSOC 316
Professor DeHart
April 6, 2009

Introduction

Human psychology naturally tends to organize itself around distinctions between the familiar and the unknown, the self and the Other. Within the ideal of modern, democratic, corporate, middle-class life in the United States today, there is little that can be distinguished as an "Other" so easily as the ethnic urban gang. Urban street gangs are a historically American phenomenon that has emerged in many other parts of the world in recent years (Manwaring 2005, Zilburg 2004). As gangs typically are associated with high levels of illegal activities and violent crime, there is widespread concern regarding the causes and consequences of these groups, and many efforts have been made to understand and explain this condition of Otherness. These narratives emerge from a variety of perspectives: security-law enforcement, political, moral, and socio-anthropological, for example. Given these different origins, there is considerable diversity of opinion about the roots, nature, threat, and impact of gangs all over the world, especially in the examination of different gangs in different regions.

One area of the gang phenomenon that has received much attention is the new transnational element of Hispanic gangs in Los Angeles and Central America. Started in Los Angeles by Mexican and Salvadoran immigrants, in part to protect themselves from the already-existing L.A. gang culture, the 18th Street (Chicano/a) and Mara Salvatrucha 13 (Salvadoran) gangs have now spread to many Latin American nations, including El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Mexico. With membership estimations ranging from 70,000 to 300,000, these gangs have become dynamic forces with an undeniable impact – generating a strange *mélange* of media hysteria, government crackdown, and

academic interest (Boerman 2007). Many mainstream explanations for the rise of gangs include concerns about poor parenting (Yablonski 2001), poverty (Cruz 2005), street socialization, and attitudes toward police (Freng 2007). A unique factor in the case of 18th Street and MS 13 is deportation – the tactic in which the U.S. deports non-citizen gang members back to their countries of origin – which is universally cited in explaining the rise of these particular transnational gangs and their expansion into Central America. This paper acknowledges and expounds upon these prevailing accounts; the primary focus, however, is to explore the ways in which gangs – specifically, the transnational 18th Street and MS gangs – constitute a zone of social abandonment within the United States and El Salvador.

As a beginning framework, I draw from the work of anthropologist João Biehl and his theory of social abandonment. In his work *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, Biehl maps the process of such abandonment by tracing the life of one woman, named Catarina, and her path to social ostracism and exclusion. Central to his theory is the idea that a status of "ex-humanness," a state of non-personhood and invisibility, must be reached in order for society to abandon a group or individual; additionally, that the processes of social change constantly offer new and altered ways in which a person can lose her perceived humanness (Biehl 2006). Using Biehl's theory as a framework, this paper delves into the historical and ecological factors that consistently strip away the personhood of potential gang members. Going beyond the oft-tread areas of gang-factor explanations, and in contrast to the above societal perceptions, I also explore the ways in which the Mara Salvatrucha and 18th street gangs in both the U.S. and El Salvador are an attempt by members to claim lost identities and re-establish

"humanness" on their own terms. With this gang identity formation, however, comes risks of visibility-through-delinquency and the idea that gang membership is both a result and a cause of perceived "ex-humanness" in a perpetuating cycle. Lastly, the paper closes with some recommendations for social change which could positively influence the gang phenomenon.

Factors associated with "ex-humanness" and gang membership in the United States

As both of these gangs found their origins in the United States, I begin with a discussion of the ecological and historical factors that facilitate gang membership in the Los Angeles area. Contrary to the popular notion of the United States as a land of opportunity, immigrant and ethnic populations often face daunting barriers to social mobility and integration. Often times these groups are greeted by "social neglect and ostracism, economic marginalization, and cultural repression" (Vigil 2002, 162). Immigrant or minority populations moving to large cities are often relegated to the cheapest areas of town and are frequently grouped together due to informal segregationist policies; thus, the result is that most ethnic groups are highly territorialized and cut off from areas of high opportunity within the city (Vigil 2002). In a study on immigrant populations and ethnic mobility, researchers found that, consistently, "young Latino men are...mired in the lowest rungs of the U.S. labor market, with nearly two out of three employed in low-wage labor" (Rumbaut 2008, 4). In running a model to determine significant factors for social success, this study also discovered that "Mexican, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan ethnicities retain negative significant effects on educational attainment," which in turn is one of the key determinants of ethnic mobility (Rumbaut 2008, 35). Therefore, there are strong structural forces that are preventing these Latino

immigrants from participating in education, lucrative employment, and other opportunities.

These findings indicate that so many of the attributes that the United States associates with success and value (i.e. true personhood and humanity) - such as education, upward mobility, and a career - are consistently denied these Central American immigrant populations. Ethnographer James Vigil attempts to explain these overlapping social failures in a theory of "multiple marginality," in which it is the "joint actions (or inactions)" of different societal institutions such as schools, the market, the family, and law enforcement that allow the issue to continue and even "make the problem worse" (2002). From these conditions, one can see that poverty itself is not what strips away a person's humanity and sets them on the path to gang membership; rather, it is constant marginalization, exclusion, blocked access to legal opportunities to change the situation that truly dehumanizes.

These problems are further exacerbated by the complex immigration codes, the legacy of historical and political conditions, and the difficulty in obtaining legal status for these immigrants. Many of the Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles today left El Salvador during the horrific civil war years that lasted from the late 1970s until 1992 (Waldinger 2008). Because the Reagan Administration saw Central America as vital to its Cold War political strategy, the United States government gave massive amounts of aid, political strategy, and military support to Central American forces fighting leftist groups, such as to the oppressive military junta in El Salvador suppressing the leftist FMLN or the Contras battling the new revolutionary government in Nicaragua (Smith 1996). Due to these political decisions and the need for delicate handling of the publicity

regarding Central American intervention, the Reagan Administration was careful to avoid recognizing or condemning the Salvadoran government's human rights abuses (Smith 1996, Waldinger 2008). This meant that the U.S. was unable to grant refugee status to the thousands of Salvadorans that arrived in the U.S. to escape the pervasive violence and seek more stable economic opportunities, as it would have meant the acknowledgement that the Salvadoran government was perpetrating politically motivated violence against its civilian population (Waldinger 2008). Denied refugee status, these Salvadoran immigrants were also excluded from many of the legal protections provided by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, were granted asylum in miniscule proportion to population (around 3%), and were left only with the Salvadorans with Temporary Protected Status Act of 1990 – a measure allowing Salvadorans "to work and reside legally in the United States on a short term basis, without, however, providing a door to permanent legal status" (Waldinger 2008, 849). In a nation that values citizenship, voting rights, and individual political agency as part of a person's worth, this denial of legal recognition and the rights it entails is a powerful denial of personhood in the eyes of the state.

The ramifications of this illegality and consequent lack of perceived humanness within the United States has left the Central American immigrant populations with few options. Upon entering the United States, these groups faced the hostility of an entrenched gang culture that extended from other ethnic groups all the way to the "gang-like practices that were structurally embedded within the police department" (Zilburg 2007, 45). Without any legal protection, Central American – particularly Salvadoran – immigrants had to rely on their own agency to adapt to Los Angeles street culture.

Research by ethnographer Elana Zilburg has "documented how the notorious elite gang abatement unit, Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) in the Rampart Division, worked actively to criminalize everyday life practices of immigrants," further restricting their abilities to support themselves through legal means (Zilburg 2007, 45). Public scandal has erupted over the tactics employed under the Rampart Division, yet it remains true nonetheless that illegal or nonpermanent residents have no rights or personhood from the perspective of the state. Thus, not only do these groups lack legal recourse, but additionally "an immigrant's legal status is a critical factor in shaping mobility – and an unauthorized status can affect virtually every facet of an immigrant's life" and "block access to opportunity" (Rumbaut 2008, 11, 38). This creates a vicious cycle of marginalization, dehumanization, criminalization, and re-marginalization that funnels immigrant youth into gang membership, which, like Catarina's abandonment, is managed at "the vortex of public institutions" (Biehl 2005, 252). With 18th Street and MS gangs, the deportation element adds a new dimension which I will discuss later in the paper.

Factors associated with "ex-humanness" and gang membership in Central America

Gang membership in Central America has a structural, ecological, and historical narrative, as it does in the United States. Contrary to the popular notion that street gangs sprang into existence with the influx of U.S. deportees, Central American gangs, or *pandillas*, actually emerged during the war years as an effort to control certain neighborhoods and defend against state, rebel, and paramilitary forces (Cruz 2005). The change that occurred with the implementation of deportation was a consolidation of smaller neighborhood groups, or *clicas*, into subsets of the larger 18th Street or MS gangs

(Cruz 2005). The continuation and proliferation of these gangs may be seen as "the product of a concurrence a great number of factors that have been socially and historically determined" (Cruz 2005, 1159, my translation). For example, the socioeconomic status of the poor is "precarious" at best, as recent neoliberal reforms in El Salvador and other Central American countries have resulted in the reduction of social programs, increased informalization of the economy, and loss of dependable jobs (Álvarez 2007). Researcher José Miquel Cruz depicts gang risk factors as an "ecological model" of overlapping societal, communal, relational, and individual forces – such as extreme social and economic exclusion, violent cultural norms, disordered urban environments, and difficulties in identity formation in these conditions (2007). He discusses the signs of El Salvador's poor as a socially abandoned group, from the fact that only ten percent of Salvadoran gang members could obtain stable employment to the obvious signs of decay and inattention within urban barrios (Cruz 2007). Correspondingly, he writes that gangs "flourish in those districts (slums) where poverty manifests itself in nonexistent or low-quality social services" (Cruz 2007, 1162, my translation). The relations which most urban Salvadoran youth have with the state is overwhelmingly one of absence and abandonment: their public spaces are deteriorated and their neighborhoods are home to more bars, brothels, and crack houses than parks or community centers (Cruz 2007, DeCesare 1998). In other words, in both the United States and Latin America, "human-rights law generally protects only civil and political rights, as opposed to economic and cultural rights...such as the right to employment, healthcare, and cultural traditions" (Coutin 2007, 156). This structural and ecological

denial of rights constantly strips Salvadoran youth and potential gang members of value, personhood, or any rightful place within a transitioning state.

Into these precarious socioeconomic conditions is added the historical legacy of El Salvador's civil war. Upon the signing of the 1992 Peace Accords, the armed conflict officially ended, but many of the economic inequality issues which had spurred its conception remained unchanged – leaving the poor of El Salvador in largely the same invisible, disenfranchised position as in the years before the war. This means that as thousands of de-mobilized guerilla and paramilitary troops floundered in their attempts to reintegrate into society, with little to no state support, their existing support structures were violent and militaristic (Coutin 2007). One can see this reflected in the language of one researcher speaking about his experiences with gangs: "the extreme degree of group affiliation is similar to that of armed service activities during wartime. The platoon, or this case, the local gang, is worth dying for" (Stretesky 2007, 98). This legacy from the war years is facilitated still further by the plethora of arms available, as "the region was awash with weapons leftover from decades of civil conflict" (Boerman 2007, 36). This combination of unresolved grievances and resentments, a generation raised amidst pervasive normative violence, a war-wearied nation, and the image of gun-toting youth, called *maras* or *pandilleros*, has led to a phenomenon paradoxically "*produced by destructive forces*" which allows the subjects – young, potentially violent *pandilleros* – to be dehumanized even further in the public eye (Coutin 2007).

'Falling between countries:' the dehumanizing factor of deportation

Those who are deported back to El Salvador – overwhelmingly young, poor, and male – face a unique set of disorienting and dehumanizing circumstances which create

prime candidates for new or continued gang membership. Given that inner-city identities are often strongly linked with territories and spatial ties, these deportees "who have complex belongings...are stripped of certain memberships" by this removal (Coutin 2007, 18). Further deepening these tensions, often the deported youths arrived at a young age in the United States years ago, speak little or different forms of Spanish, and know even less about El Salvador – despite its being their legal country of origin (Zilburg 2004). Many lack proof of Salvadoran citizenship once they arrive, or are "dumped" at the Salvadoran airport in the words of one NGO worker, and thus they become "doubly illegal," with no rightful belonging in any country (Coutin 2007). The deportation act is in itself also "a strong form of rejection, a withdrawal of rights, connections, and services – in short, an abandonment," as Salvadoran youths are denied even the marginal existences and identities they have provided for themselves in Los Angeles (Coutin 2007, 33). As discussed in the above sections, the marginalization and abandonment does not end once they reach El Salvador, as Salvadoran "post-war democracy is deeply marked by the exclusion of those already excluded by U.S. democratic society. Therefore, gang youth mark the doubly untenable hyphenation between nation-states" (Zilburg 2007, 48). Having their rights, possible citizenship, humanity, and even presence denied by their country of choice; and facing no support in their country of origin; these youths are "out of place, and therefore not fully present" and so they "fall between countries" (Coutin 2007, 44). They have reached the status of transnational social and political "ex-human." In this light, gangs and gang membership appear to be the attempt to re-construct a human identity from this invisibility, denial, and fragmentation.

Gangs as identity formations and agents of resistance

This view involves a transition from seeing gangs as purely pathological into a perception of gangs as instruments of resistance, or "innovative subcultures of meaning-making, ambivalence, and self-organization" which "break the shrouds of race and ethnic invisibility" (Brotherton 2008, 61, 66). One important aspect of street gang culture is the prominent use of symbols, tattoos, rituals, graffiti, music, slang and other aesthetic forms of expression (Brotherton 2008, Álvarez 2007). A resistance-oriented perception of gangs reads these practices as "struggles for representation" and the formation of new individual and collective identities (Brotherton 2008, 62, Álvarez 2007). Such usage also allows gang members to highlight their social status, transforming social stigmas into symbols of a strong identity and redefining power relationships and dependencies (Álvarez 2007). Like Biehl's emphasis on Catarina's writing, this view sees gang membership as an active way to combat abandonment and to "[produce] their own texts" (Brotherton 2008, 67). Most importantly, these connections re-establish personhood and a secure sense of self for gang members. This is shown in the comment by one gang member interviewed in prison, as he notes "Every man [in a gang] is treated as a man until proven different. We see you as a man before anything" (Stretesky 2007). One can see the importance of the validated manhood (i.e. personhood) within the group dynamic, and given the legacy of marginalization and denial out of which most of these members emerge, this is a powerful force. From this perspective, one can also read the presence of guns and violence not only as a practical response to the hazards of street life, but also as active efforts to maintain a reputation, group identity, and personhood within the gang. One researcher observed that "according to gang members we talked to, disrespect, or rejection of self-professed identity by others, often

was the cause of violence" and that "guns are tools that aid in identity formation and impression management" (Stretesky 2007, 104, 108). Gangs, guns, and violence as agents of resistance, then, carry some powerful attractions and tools for their members.

Additionally, gangs are not always mere vehicles of perpetuation, condemning their members to a life sentence on the streets. Many produce action that extends beyond turf wars and crimes; for example, American gangs have engaged in protests over police brutality, the death penalty, and the Iraq war (Brotherton 2008), while their Central American counterparts participate in support of rival political parties in the form of rallies and the like (Zilburg 2007). Recognizing this potential for widespread action could be enormously impacting of future gang-centered social policy efforts.

Visibility through delinquency and "the new insurgency"

The construction of gang-related identities, however, carries problematic consequences: in the eyes of society at large, these identities are only visible through their delinquency. This creates the danger that "structural conditions and historical processes come to be situated in persons" (Coutin 2007, 165). Much like Biehl's description of Catarina as a "pharmaceutical being" and the ways in which this justified her abandonment (2005), this perception of gang-delinquency-identity roots the origins of the problem in the pathologies of the subjects – a mindset which implies the problem must be cut out of society rather than rehabilitated or reintegrated. We can see this phenomenon at work in the different suppression tactics and public discourse of increasing Otherness surrounding gangs in both the United States and Latin America.

In the United States, the shift to a pathological view of gangs began around the 1970s, with new academic definitions of gangs that included explicit references to

outsiders' perceptions of gangs and delinquency as inherent to their composition (Brotherton 2008). The trend has continued, continually repositioning gangs not as *symptoms* of larger societal ills, but as *causes* of a wide array of social dysfunctions, including terrorism, organized crime, prison culture, and school decay (Brotherton 2008). Correspondingly, increased anti-immigration sentiment has been matched with an increased association of emigration as no longer a product but a cause of violence (Coutin 2007). Referred to as an "urban insurgency," public discourse surrounding gangs has taken on highly militaristic tones, calling the situation "nonstate war" and explicitly listing gang threats along side those of "Osama bin Laden's terrorits, Maoist insurgents...and warlords" (Manwaring 2005, 7). The enforcement tactics reflect this mentality of a "zero-sum game in which there can only be one winner or no winners," with heavy incarceration and deportation rates (Manwariing 2005, 39).

With the support of the United States, many Central American states have embarked upon similarly harsh tactics, such as El Salvador's Mano Dura (Tough Hand) legislation. Among the provisions of this legislation is the "illicit association" regulations, which have criminalized gang membership and allow for the arrest of those merely suspected of being in a gang (Boerman 2007). Described as "tactics that...place criminals outside the collectivity of citizens (indeed, of humans) who have rights," these suppression techniques further dehumanize gang members and prevent any meaningful rehabilitation or reconciliation (Coutin 2007). These tactics also bear eerie similarity to those used against leftist guerrillas during the civil war years, leading some to believe that "gangs have replaced guerrillas as the new 'insurgency'" for the government (Coutin 2007, 168). For example, newspapers regularly publish the pictures, gang nick names,

and legal names of wanted gang members – just as newspapers used to publish death threats against the opposition – and paramilitary, vigilante death squads have mobilized against gang members with, at times, the tacit support of government forces (Zilburg 2007). Given that gang identity-formation is often the only recourse left to these young Salvadorans, these harsh measures criminalize their very identities and perpetuate their ex-humanness in the eyes of the state and the public.

Proposed social change and conclusions

Given popular perceptions of the gang threat, "current strategies are best characterized by piecemeal measures that target symptoms and are rooted in a combination of 'Moral Panic' and elected officials' efforts to demonstrate a 'get tough on gangs' stance" (Boerman 2007, 44). No real comprehensive efforts have been made to address the problem in a "holistic manner;" additionally, research has found that Central American 18th Street and MS gang members "have become more committed to a gang lifestyle because Mano Durisma emphasizes repression to the virtual exclusion of rehabilitation and social reinsertion programs that could provide them the assistance they need" (Boerman 2007, 37, 46). Thus, any meaningful social change for gang members would have to be rooted in a commitment to re-humanizing and re-personalizing gang members through personal connections, amnesty, and increased legal opportunities.

There are a small number of success stories in the field of gang studies related to 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha members, such as churches committed to rehabilitation through personal relations with the *pandilleros* and programs such as Homies Unidos in San Salvador, which acts as a support service for deported gang members and encourages gang peace activism (Gómez 1999, DeCesare 1998). In order for these organizations to

have success, however, larger societal changes must take place in the de-criminalization of gangs as entities and the comprehensive investment of social services and legal options in low-income neighborhoods, ghettos, and barrios. In Barcelona and Geneva, authorities actually legitimized the Latin King/Queens and Ñeta gangs as "legally recognized 'cultural associations'," thereby bringing them into the realm of cultural integration and legality (Brotherton 2008, 66). While such a radical measure may be slightly unrealistic for the Americas at this point, smaller de-criminalizing steps could still help. A publicized statement, for instance, that any gang members seeking intervention help would not be questioned for intelligence about their former gang and its activities could alleviate the fear of gang-sponsored retribution, which is a major obstacle for potential defectors. Immigration reform and the cessation of deportation tactics would also come closer to the official recognition of personhood necessary to integrate current and potential gang members into legal society.

In this manner, viewing gangs through the lens of social change, possibilities for "ex-humanness," and social abandonment carries some important consequences. It creates scenarios in which we can envision reforms such as those mentioned above, rather than zero-tolerance suppression tactics that only create overwhelming flows of incarceration or transport the problem somewhere else. More importantly, however, such a framework has the potential to re-humanize the gang members, to catch glimpses of the familiar within the Other, and we can view their actions as attempts to reclaim their ignored or denied identities in an often hostile world.

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